

'A government by the people'

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With the holiday season behind us and 2008 under way, it's a good time to consider what kind of year we're hoping for.

As usual, January greets us with a host of important issues to be addressed. Our struggle to end the war in Iraq looms over all, but we're also confronting crises ranging from climate change to health care costs to a broken housing market. If there's one thing that my years of service have taught me, it's that such problems can only be overcome through engagement and cooperation.

Congress doesn't return to Washington until January 15, so I'd like to take this chance to step back from the political quagmire and address an issue very important to me: civic participation. When I say that important issues of the day require engagement and cooperation, I don't mean just by the many politicians in Sacramento and Washington. Every one of us must be involved for our country's process to work.

Promoting political advocacy by teaching people how to work within our vast government bureaucracy has been a guiding theme of my years as county supervisor, state assemblyman and member of Congress. I have always said that if I disappear tomorrow, I want my neighbors on the Central Coast to know how to appeal to government directly and make sure their voices are heard.

Every individual elected to public office is ready and willing to listen to their constituents. For my part, my office doors in Salinas and Santa Cruz are always open--and I welcome everyone from the Central Coast to stop by my Washington office if they're in town. I do my very best to reply to every phone call, e-mail or letter my office receives (we get hundreds a day).

I encourage you to let your elected officials know how you feel on issues you care about. If you

feel strongly about ending the war in Iraq or funding new ways to conserve energy, let them know. If you think the local library needs to stay open longer or the park isn't safe, let them know. That kind of direct contact let's them know how the community feels.

You also must vote. It may sound like a no-brainer, but so many Americans don't take the time to cast their ballot. In the past several days, Iowa and New Hampshire have brought the hunt for our next president into our living rooms. And while it may take a political junkie to watch all the hoopla leading up to these selections, who wasn't at least a little excited about all the suspense? This year is an especially good time to get involved with a presidential campaign. With so many options facing voters--and California voting earlier--there's an issue and a candidate for every taste.

And don't forget our local elections. While some of the positions may not sound sexy, officials who serve on local school boards could be your next county supervisor, mayor or state representative.

But the funny thing about being politically involved is that it's so much more than just politics. Even more important are all the local groups that form the foundation of our communities. We're lucky that the Central Coast is more active than much of the nation, and Santa Cruz even more so. We're surrounded by many passionate people, and it's easy to feed off that energy. But if you're not involved, go out and join your neighbors and make things happen.

So what issues will I be working on this year? Getting out of Iraq was my top priority last year and it's my No. 1 priority again this year. Democrats in the House made progress last year, but we just don't have the votes in Senate to change enough Republican minds. How can you help? Everyone who reads this column can call all of their friends and relatives (especially those in states with Republican senators!) and urge them to do the right thing and end the war. See, being involved isn't even enough; now you have to reach out to others!

Locally, I'm always worried about our lack of affordable housing. I keep abreast of developments at the former Fort Ord in the south and encourage Santa Cruz to expand its own stock of affordable housing closer to home. I also do my best to keep everyone on the Central Coast aware of developments that may affect them. We have some great resources to help with the mortgage crisis, and my office stands ready to help when possible.

Those are just a few of the items that will fill my time this year, and I hope they might find their way onto your schedule as well. Being involved in our communities and in our political process is the best way to make sure they work properly. I hope you may be able to find a few hours to be an advocate or volunteer for an issue that is important to you.

And I wish everyone a happy 2008.